J. Claire Dean

Rock Image Conservation at Petroglyph National Monument

Rock images, also known as rock art, are usually found as petroglyphs (images incised, pecked or abraded into a rock surface), pictographs (drawn or painted images), or images created combining aspects of both forms within a single glyph. A third category are geoglyphs, or ground figures— designs created by placing rocks on, or removing them from, a ground surface resulting in alterations in texture, dimension, and color that form an image.

Due to the inherent nature of rock images—their size, location, and historical and contemporary use—their conservation presents some unique problems for the conservator and land manager. With the exception of individual images collected in the past (when to do so was considered acceptable practice), rock images are no longer collected, reducing them to objects that are gathered and placed in museum collections to be managed and conserved as individual articles of cultural heritage. Today, such actions are not accepted as ethical, except under the most extreme situations, such as a site's imminent destruction due to land development. Even then it is common for strenuous efforts to be made to find an alternative to the demolition of the site.

Thanks to recent re-evaluation of the archeology, the ethnographic record, and consultation with Native Peoples, we now better understand the importance of context with regard to the meaning and function of rock images—information that is vital when planning appropriate conservation. The images and their context are culturally inseparable. They are an integral part of the landscape in which they were created, often placed in carefully chosen locations associated with, even incorporating, natural features. A petroglyph of an animal might be created to include a ridge in the rock to form its spine, giving it a three-dimensional quality, or images might be deliberately placed so as to appear to emerge or disappear through natural holes or fissures. In southern California, a site depicting water creatures is situated in the path of a seasonal spring that when active, flows over the images—an association which is hard to pass off as coincidental.

Since rock images are located outdoors, the nearest preservation comparison might be the conservation of buildings and monuments. Although the conservation approach and materials applied to structures are often of use with rock images, they also are frequently not applicable because, unlike most structures, rock images are more intimately executed on and into living landforms. Buildings and monuments are most commonly constructions that stand alone, inserted into a space and retaining a certain amount of physical independence from the surrounding natural terrain. Put simply, they are giant objects. If you were to try to define rock images in terms of being "objects," then their demarcating boundaries would be those of the geology, biology, and environment of an entire geographic region.

The sheer size and physical complexity of rock images make cooperative work between various entities essential for a conservator. The need for this integrated approach to treatment is further emphasized by the continued use of rock images by Native Americans. The concerns of these traditional owners must also influence how the conservation of these places is undertaken.

Petroglyph National Monument in Albuquerque, New Mexico, authorized in June 1990, has demonstrated a proactive approach to conservation since its earliest days. The monument, managed through a partnership between the National Park Service and the City of Albuquerque, Open Space Division, and mandated to protect over 15,000 petroglyphs within its boundaries, has a long history of working with conservators to preserve the images. In 1992, the Open Space Division asked me to provide general conservation advice.

Conservation treatment began soon after with the enthusiastic support of staff from both managing agencies. Painted graffiti was dealt with first, as it was the most visually obvious and roused the most public outcry. Soon afterward, efforts were expanded to tackle the scratched graffiti. Re-integration methods already commonly in use were adopted, but met with mixed success due to the extreme environmental conditions at the monument. Recently, the monument has supported a five-year-long project to develop and field test longer-lasting re-integration methods and materials for the treatment of scratched graffiti. This has involved a second conservator, John Griswold, of Griswold Conservation Associates.

Since the beginning of the project, monument staff members have been actively involved working with the conservator to attain a certain level of skill in-house, thus enabling staff to tackle some of the problems themselves, especially when new graffiti occurred. In 1995, I was asked to hold a training workshop for the monument staff, thereby providing formal instruction in both materials and methods, and as importantly, background information about the basic principals and approaches of professional conservation practice.

Throughout the conservation work at the monument, treatments have been undertaken with careful consideration of the concerns of Native American communities in the area, with whom the monument staff are involved in on-going consultation. This project provides an excellent case study of conservation treatment not being approached as a "quick fix as needed" answer to the care of cultural property, but rather as an integral part of the on-going management of a major cultural resource.

J. Claire Dean, Dean and Associates Conservation Services, Portland, Oregon, serves as the conservator to the Rock Art Research Institute, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa, and sits on the Board of Directors of the American Rock Art Research Association.

Managing Archeological Collections Distance Learning

This online technical assistance and distance learning effort covers a wide range of issues and activities involved in caring for archeological collections. These include planning strategies, conservation, ownership of collections, accessioning and deaccessioning objects, curation costs, digital records, and many others. The course focuses on the objects, records, reports, and digital data in the field, lab, office, and repository. This "one-stop shopping" effort is designed to help archeological professionals and students learn more about preserving and managing archeological collections over the long term.

Managing Archeological Collections <www.cr.nps.gov/aad/collections/> consists of 10 sections, such as "Relevant Laws, Regulations, Policies, and Ethics," "Today's Key Issues," "Curation Prior to the Field," and "Access and Use of Collections." Each section has an extensive bibliography, a page of links to related web sites, and a review quiz. There is also a large glossary of key terms that is linked throughout the site.

This distance learning effort covers issues related to conservation of archeological material remains and records in several sections, including "Curation Prior to the Field," "Curation in the Field and Lab," "Repositories: Functions and Policies," and "Collections Management." Unfortunately, the conservation of materials from submerged contexts is not adequately discussed due to a lack of subject matter expertise by the web site creators. They hope to work with conservators to fill this important gap in the near future.

This web site is the product of the Archeology and Ethnography Program, National Park Service. It benefited enormously from extensive review by many colleagues who generously gave their time and expertise. It will be updated as colleagues provide additional, pertinent information for publication.

Terry Childs
Archeologist
Archeology and Ethnography Program
National Park Service